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ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHICS.

The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas.

By Dr. Edward Westermarck. Vol. i. Pp. xxi+716. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1906.) Price 14s. net.

IN one engaging paragraph of this work, its author describes how, whilst living in the North of Morocco—where he spent four years studying folklore—he was described as a person with “propitious ankles,” because the village where he stayed was frequently visited by favoured and distinguished guests. Propitiousness is not with us the most familiar term in such a context, but the ankles of Dr. Westermarck’s intellectual endeavour are certainly sturdy. The readers of his “History of Human Marriage”—all of them his debtors—were doubtless prepared for the vast array of footnotes, the excellent way in which long series of facts are arranged, the clearness of the style, the sanity and reasonableness of a work which certainly was needed to keep ethical theory abreast of anthropological research, and which will add greatly to its author’s reputation.

This first volume divides itself into two parts. In the earlier the author states his theory of moral judgments, and discusses generally the nature of the phenomena which tend to evoke moral blame or moral praise. In the later part he examines the particular modes of conduct which are subject to moral valuation, and considers how these are judged by different peoples and in different ages.

The chief topics dealt with in the later part are homicide, human sacrifice, hospitality, the subjection of children, and the subjection of wives. It is certainly a great benefit to have the facts so clearly stated on which inductions may be based, and to discover, too, how far generalisations are possible; to be told, for example, that there does exist a moral rule among mankind forbidding people to kill members of their own society, but “that the stringency of this rule is subject to variations, depending on the special relationship in which persons stand to one another, or on their social status, and that there are cases to which it does not apply at all.” It is profitable, too, to have certain lingering prejudices corrected. The subjection of wives is a case in point. Dr. Westermarck discusses the apparently cruel custom which ordains (*e.g.* among the Panama Indians) that “the woman should be burdened with a heavy load, while the man walks before her carrying nothing but his weapons. But a little reflection will make it plain that the man has good reason for keeping himself free and mobile. The little caravan is surrounded with dangers: the man must be on the alert and ready in an instant to catch his arms to defend himself and his family against the aggressor.”

Or, again, he contests the frequently repeated statement that a people’s civilisation may be measured by the position held by the women.

“So far at least as the earlier stages of culture are concerned, this opinion is not supported by facts.

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Among several of the lowest races, including peoples like the Veddahs, Andaman Islanders, and Bushmans, the female sex is treated with far higher consideration than among many of the higher savages and barbarians. Travellers have not seldom noticed that of two neighbouring tribes the less cultured one sets, in this respect, an example to the other.”

The theoretical part of the work calls for a more detailed criticism. Dr. Westermarck interprets his subject—the origin of moral ideas—very literally, and steadily refuses to discuss validity; in fact, he does not even suggest that there is room or need for a larger investigation, a metaphysic of some sort, such as a work on so-called scientific ethics may perhaps be allowed to omit. His theory is that the moral judgments are based entirely on emotions either of indignation or approval. Consequently there is no objective standard; neither the utilitarian principle that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, nor the “practical” or “moral” reason, nor any other standard that may be suggested. “If moral judgments differ from any others that are rooted in the subjective sphere of experience, it is largely a difference in degree rather than in kind.” No doubt morality may be in a much greater degree than beauty a subject of instruction and of profitable discussion, but the emotional constitution of man is not so uniform as the human intellect. Such uniformity as there is certainly suggests objectivity; and we are further tempted to objectivise our moral judgments by the fact that authority is so widely ascribed to moral rules. But all this presumed objectivity of moral judgments is a chimæra: for the moral concepts are based upon emotions, and the contents of an emotion fall entirely outside the category of truth. All that can come under the category of truth, all that can be stated as a proposition objectively valid, is that a given mode of conduct has a tendency to evoke in us moral indignation or moral approval.

To all this there are very serious objections. Our author’s position is, of course, very natural for one to occupy who is able from the serene heights of anthropology to survey the many contradictions that exist among moral judgments, and to doubt the possibility of unity and objectivity among them. But is *moral* judgment the only sphere in which such difficulty is found? Truth is objective, says Dr. Westermarck. But, not to out-Pilate Pilate, when have we got truth? and has the long labour of science revealed no astonishing contrariety of judgments even in matters where emotions, moral or other, have no place? Man constructs one aspect of experience into knowledge and science: is this intellectual system less liable to error, is it more certainly correct and true than his construction of another aspect into morality and ethics?

Some sentences of Dr. Westermarck seem an elaborate parrying of the point. The best treatment of objectivity in morals is probably that of the late Professor Sidgwick, who argued that there would be general agreement in morals, if only the moral consciousness of men were sufficiently developed. But our author replies, “We may speak of an intellect as

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sufficiently developed to grasp a certain truth, because truth is objective; but it is not proved to be objective by the fact that it is recognised as true by a 'sufficiently developed' intellect. The objectivity of truth lies in the recognition of facts as true by all who understand them fully, whilst the appeal to a sufficient knowledge assumes their objectivity." How anyone can understand facts fully without sufficient knowledge it will puzzle the plain man to discover. And in another passage he writes: "Far above the vulgar idea that the right is a settled something to which everybody has to adjust his opinions, rises the conviction that it has existence in each individual mind, capable of any expansion, proclaiming its own right to exist, if needs be, venturing to make a stand against the whole world." This sentence seems to the writer of this notice a huge mis-statement, or, if true, true only in the sense in which the same sentence must be understood with the words "the truth" substituted for the words "the right."

But to linger over the more controversial aspects of such a book is always an ungrateful task. With the rest of the work there is little fault to be found. The account of the moral emotions, the treatment of punishment (in which subtle arguments are offered against determent as a sufficient guiding principle), the discussion of the various distinctions suggested by terms like act, agent, motive, intention, the detailed examination of the facts advanced by such authorities as Lord Avebury, Dr. J. G. Frazer, Dr. Steinmetz, are all excellent. On the whole, Dr. Westermarck's view of the condition of savage races is one flattering to humanity—if not to civilisation. He points out how much more brutal punishment has often been among the civilised than among the uncivilised. He believes in the "noble savage," and thinks that many accounts of "savagery" among savage races come from a time when they have been affected by a "higher culture," a culture "which almost universally has proved to exercise a deteriorating influence on the character of the lower races." One would like to see a monograph devoted to this subject, and learn what the best missionaries have to say.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY.

Joseph Priestley. By T. E. Thorpe, F.R.S. English Men of Science. Edited by Dr. J. Reynolds Green. Pp. viii + 228. (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1906.) Price 2s. 6d. net.

IT is a curious and unaccountable fact that whilst for more than fifty years we have been in possession of a biography of Cavendish, whose solitary and uneventful existence was chiefly passed within the four walls of his laboratory, a whole century has elapsed without the appearance of any worthy record of Priestley's life, which was so full of human interest and dramatic incident. Following closely upon the centenary commemoration of Priestley's death, the new volume in the series of English Men of Science comes as a fitting and welcome memorial.

That the task should have fallen to Dr. Thorpe

seems perfectly natural and appropriate, and one might feel assured beforehand that the writer of the charming little biography of Humphry Davy, poet and philosopher, would be equally happy in his treatment of the present subject. These anticipations have not been disappointed. The book is not for chemists only. It will attract a wider circle of readers, and will not fail to add to the literary reputation of its distinguished author.

No one has perhaps portrayed his own character in his writings more graphically than Priestley. We know the main events of his life from his own pen; we can study his opinions, religious, political and social, in his numerous brochures; the records of his chemical experiments vividly reflect his scientific habit of thought. All his writings express the same candour and simplicity, the same virile honesty, which were the keynotes of his character.

Priestley has happily been allowed to tell his story as far as possible in his own words, and the abstracts from his memoirs, supplemented by others, notably Miss Aikin's account of the life at the Warrington Academy and Miss Russell's thrilling description of the Birmingham riots, are skilfully woven into a continuous and delightful narrative.

Chemists will naturally turn with special interest to the account of Priestley's scientific labours, and here it must be confessed that the small space, unavoidably, no doubt, allotted to this section is the least satisfying part of the volume.

The vast accumulation of experiments from their discursive treatment and confused arrangement would have repaid careful editing. But if we have not everything, we have at least a substantial record of what is most valuable among Priestley's discoveries.

Priestley was in a sense a follower of Hales. The musket-barrel, the trough for collecting gases, the burning-glass for heating substances in vessels standing over water, are described in the "Vegetable Staticks." Hales, moreover, obtained oxygen, like Priestley, by heating red lead in a gun-barrel, but he never knew that the gas he so carefully collected and measured differed from ordinary air. But if Priestley's experiments were suggested by those of Hales they served only as a foundation to build upon. The improvement introduced by Priestley into pneumatic apparatus would alone have earned for him a lasting reputation and the gratitude of subsequent generations of chemists; but his great discovery was, of course, the recognition of different kinds of air.

As a theorist Priestley's claims are insignificant, for he was particularly unfortunate in interpreting his own observations. Dr. Thorpe says very truly:

"The contrast between Priestley the social, political and theological reformer, always in advance of his times, receptive, fearless and insistent, and Priestley the man of science—timorous and halting when he might well be bold, conservative and orthodox when almost every other active worker was heterodox and progressive—is most striking."

Equally striking is the absence of any well-considered plan in his method of experimenting when his